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Mr. Lindsay on "Primitive Singing"

MR. LINDSAY ON "PRIMITIVE SINGING"

Mr. Yeats asked me recently in Chicago: "What are we going to do to restore the primitive singing of poetry?" I find what Mr. Yeats means by the "primitive singing of poetry," in Prof. Edward Bliss Reed's new volume on the English lyric. He says in his chapter on the definition of the lyric: "With the Greeks 'Song' was an all-embracing term. It included the crooning of the nurse to the child, . . . the half-sung chant of the mower or sailor, . . . the formal ode sung by the poet. In all Greek lyrics, even in the choral odes, music was the handmaid of verse . . . the poet himself composed the accompaniment. Euripides was censured because Iophon . . . had assisted him in the setting of some of his dramas."

Here is pictured a type of Greek work which survives in American vaudeville, where every line may be two-thirds spoken and one-third sung, the entire rendering, musical and elocutionary, depending largely upon the improvising power and sure instinct of the performer.

I respectfully submit *The Firemen's Ball* as an experiment in which I endeavor to carry this vaudeville form back towards the old Greek precedent of the half-chanted lyric. In this case the one-third of music must be added by the instinct of the reader. He must be Iophon. And he can easily be Iophon if he brings to bear upon the piece what might be called the Higher Vaudeville imagination. The essential points are: close attention to the turning point in

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the middle of the piece, and delicate rendering of the first half of the second section, set in abrupt contrast to the second half, in which the death-whisper of True-Love—and, if you will, of all fine things—is drowned by the noise of the brass-band: “But his cry is drowned by the proud band-master.”

The first half of the third section, including the quotation, could be intoned in a semi-priestly manner. Then comes the final clamor of the engines.

The Santa Fé Trail is another experiment in this manner.

Big general contrasts between the main sections should be the rule of the first attempts at improvising. It is the hope of the writer that, after two or three readings, each line will suggest its own separate touch of melody to the performer who has become accustomed to the cadences. Let him read what he likes read, and sing what he likes sung.

The actual Firemen’s Ball occurred in Springfield, Illinois, November 13, 1913. The vast I. N. G. Arsenal was jammed with fire-laddies and their sweethearts of an hour.

N. V. L.

DOINA

It is difficult to explain what the word *Doina* suggests to a Roumanian peasant. It seems to mean the very spirit of the popular poetry which is sung by native bards to the accompaniment of a simple instrument.

Mr. Aisen, the translator of our group of poems, who is a Roumanian living in Chicago, says: